BOOK REVIEW

Medley Wood's grandchild. J. Medley Wood, Handbook of the Flora of Natal (1907); J. W. Bews, The Flora of Natal and Zululand (1921); J. H. Ross, Flora of Natal* (1972): the lineage is direct, not only in subject but in format. None of these works is a full Flora; they are all three a combination of a generic Flora (with key to families and genera) and a specific check list. The plea for generic Floras has often been made, notably in recent years by F. Verdoorn and by T. Just (see Chronica Botanica 14: 94–101 & 102–114, 1953), but it has usually fallen on deaf ears: a Flora that does not deal with species clearly has no appeal to most taxonomists. Yet if the local flora contains nearly 5000 species in some 1200 genera (the current Natal figures), how does the student or non-taxonomic botanist get to know them? A full 4–5 volume Flora of Natal, even if it were available, would scarcely be a handy companion for the Drakensberg escarpment. A generic Flora alone is inadequate: it brings one to an oversharp full-stop. To have keys to genera and then a list of species, with a rough indication of distribution, is probably as good a compromise as is possible. Species names of plants of especial interest can be obtained by submitting specimens to experts, and the known species can gradually be ticked off. A Flora of this type should not, therefore, be regarded as a temporary makeshift, but as the pattern on which further advance will be made.

Medley Wood's Handbook was followed by revised lists and addenda by the same author up to 1913: thus Bews had less than a 10 year gap to fill. Ross has had no less than 50 years to cover, years for which no overall lists of additions and changes were, I think, available. Quite apart from the modern tendency to split up some families, that period of 50 years saw the addition of no less than 13 new families to the Flora. At the species level there was a staggering advance of 1032 species; and this in an area where taxonomic activity has not been high and certainly species-splitting has been minimal. That the advance is not finished is shown by the preceding paper (but it should be noted that most of the newly described Compositae were listed as unnamed species and are therefore included in Ross's totals); certainly one must agree that there are many parts of Natal where much more collecting is needed.

The greater part of the preparation of this list was done in Natal, some parts being checked at the National Herbarium, Pretoria. Dr Ross is well aware that neither library nor herbarium resources were adequate to enable him to produce an exhaustive record. There will certainly be additions from the past as well as additions from new collecting and subtractions resulting from new studies. Dr Ross's work was carried out as a staff member of the Botanical Research Institute, whose headquarters are at Pretoria, and one hopes that adequate arrangements are being made to keep records up to date so that the birth of the next in the lineage, Medley Wood's great-grandchild, will be an easier labour.

It is irrelevant, in a review of such a work as this, to point out that this species does not occur in Natal, or that that species should be called something else. Mistakes are inevitable. It would seem to me, however, that Dr Ross has done an amazingly good job of work and has given a survey of the flora far in advance of that previously available. He has been fortunate to have the specialist help of Dr K. D. Gordon-Gray for grasses and sedges (groups where much work is evidently still needed), and of Dr O. M. Hilliard for Compositae. That there are specialists working in Natal on these important families leads one to hope that more detailed treatments down to the specific level will be forthcoming in due course. In species-rich floras the pattern we should strive towards should be a volume like this for the field, and more extensive treatments of the major families for the bookshelf at home or at work.

Ross's Flora should give an enormous fillip to field botany in Natal. The limp cover is pleasingly designed but tends to curl, and the margins are too narrow: the book will not wear well in the ruc-sac. Every student, however addicted to mitochondria or the transpiration stream, should be able to produce a thoroughly dog-eared copy before he graduates in Botany.

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* The Flora of Natal. By J. H. Ross. Botanical Survey Memoir No. 39. Pretoria, 1972. 21 × 15 cm. 418 pp. Obtainable from Department of Agricultural Technical Services. Private Bag 144, Pretoria, South Africa. Price, Rands 4.25 (S. Africa), Rands 5,45 (foreign), post free.